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Date of Deposit January 27, 2004
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Maria Arreola-Flores
(Typed or printed name of person mailing)
Maria Arreola-Flores
(Signature of person mailing)

CONSTANT PACE CARD GAME

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

[0001] The present invention relates to a system for maintaining a relatively constant pace of a card game and enhances the drama of the game, such as a poker game, and optionally provides visual effects which indicate one or more stages of a card game, such as the expiration of a predetermined time for a player to take action.

2. Description of the Prior Art

[0002] Card games, such as poker games, have experienced an increasing amount of popularity over the years. Indeed, poker tournaments have become a spectator sport that is normally televised before a live studio audience and broadcast over one of the television networks at a later date. Unlike other spectator sports, the actions and movement of the players in a poker game are fairly minor. In order to maintain interest of the studio audience as well as the interest of the television audience, various exhibition techniques have been used. For example, U.S. Patent

No. 5,451,054 relates to a use of a custom poker table configured with a plurality of card viewing windows adjacent to each player station. The card viewing windows are built into the playing surface of the poker table and enable each player to place their cards face down so that the players' cards can be displayed to the viewing audience without revealing the cards to the other players.

[0003] With a custom poker table as disclosed in the '054 patent, a video camera is disposed beneath the card viewing window. Unfortunately, while the cards are being viewed by the viewing audience, the poker game is continuing in the background, out of view of the viewing audience. Thus, even though the player's hand is displayed by way of the card viewing window, the viewing audience misses a portion of the poker game while the players' cards are being displayed.

[0004] In order to solve these problems and to maintain the interest of the viewing audience, improved exhibition techniques have been developed. For example, commonly owned U.S. Patent Application No. 10/353,319, filed on January 29, 2003, assigned to the same assignee as the assignee of the present invention, discloses a method for exhibiting a card game in which graphic and text data are selectively superimposed on video frames of the card game in progress in a relatively unobtrusive manner in order to inform the viewing audience of each player's hands and each player's bets while allowing the viewing audience to continue watching the game in progress.

[0005] The amount of time for a poker hand to be played may be limited in some situations, in order to prevent a player from taking an inordinate amount of time to play a hand and potentially lose the interest of the audience in the game. For example, poker

tournaments are governed by rules of the Tournament Directors' Association (TDA) (www.thepokerforum.com/tda.htm). The TDA is formed from a group of poker room managers, tournament directors, and players from around the country with an objective to draft a standardized set of rules for poker tournaments around the world. One such rule governs the amount of time for playing a hand is covered by TDA Rule 4 (www.thepokerforum.com/tdarules.htm). This Rule 4 may be used by any of the players to limit the amount of time of another player that is taking an inordinate amount of time to play a hand. The rules may be invoked by any player requesting the tournament director to call for a "clock procedure." The clock procedure is governed by TDA Rule 4, as set forth below.

[0006] "4. Calling for the clock procedures, once a reasonable amount of time has passed and a clock is called for, a player will be given one minute to make a decision. If action has not been taken by the time the minute is over, there will be a 10-second countdown. If the player has not acted on his hand by the time the countdown is over, the hand will be dead."

[0007] When a clock procedure is called for, the tournament director then times the player's response. If the player has not responded within the specified time period, the hand is declared dead. In some known poker tournaments, the end of the time period for playing a hand in such a situation was indicated by a buzzer.

[0008] Although the clock procedure is available for placing time limits on a player who takes an inordinate amount of time to play a hand, such a procedure is infrequently invoked. Thus, during normal poker play when the clock procedure is not invoked, no time limits exist for players to play their hands. Thus, the pace of the poker tournament may vary, potentially causing at least intermittent decrease in interest in the game by the viewing audience. Thus, there is a need to maintain a relatively steady

pace in poker tournaments in order to maintain a relatively constant interest in the tournament by the viewing audience.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0009] The present invention relates to a method for maintaining a relatively steady pace of a card game and enhancing the drama associated with a game, such as a poker game. The method may be used with virtually any poker game to maintain a relatively constant pace, for example, in a poker tournament. In essence, as play passes to a player, the player is given a predetermined time period within which to play the hand before a subsequent action is taken which could result in the player's hand being declared dead. By limiting the amount of time for a player to play a turn, the pace of card game will be relatively constant. In order to further enhance the interest of the viewing audience in the game, visual effects may optionally be provided to provide an indication to the players, as well as the viewing audience, of the time period. For example, in one embodiment of the invention, a so-called "shot clock" may be provided. The shot clock may be an analog or digital clock that is disposed in view of the players, as well as the viewing audience. As such, when play passes to a player, the shot clock may be configured to count down from a predetermined time period, for example, sixty seconds. Additional visual indications may also be provided. For example, at the end of the predetermined time period, various visual lighting effects, such as pulsating studio lighting and/or changing colors of the studio lighting, may be provided to indicate the end of the predetermined time period or intermediate intervals thereof.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

[0010] These and other advantages of the present invention will be readily understood with reference to the following specification and attached drawing wherein:

[0011] FIG. 1 is an exemplary block diagram of an exemplary embodiment of the invention illustrating the use of a clock and lighting effects used to provide visual indication of the amount of time that a player has to play a hand.

[0012] FIG. 2A is an exemplary embodiment of a digital shot clock for use with the present invention.

[0013] FIG. 2 is an exemplary embodiment of an analogue shot clock for use with the present invention.

[0014] FIG. 3 is an exemplary embodiment of a control panel for controlling the system illustrated in FIG. 1.

[0015] FIG. 4 is an exemplary timing diagram illustrating the steady on and different rates of pulsing of the lighting effects in accordance with one aspect of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0016] The present invention relates to a method for maintaining a relatively steady pace of a card game and enhancing the drama associated with the game, such as a poker game. Although the following description and attached drawings essentially relate to poker games, it will be appreciated by those of ordinary skill in the art that the principles of the present invention are virtually applicable to virtually any card game.

[0017] The method for maintaining the pace of the card game is particularly useful in poker tournaments with virtually any of the unrecognized or recognized poker

games, such as Texas Hold'em; Omaha Hold'em; Seven-Card Stud; Mississippi Seven-Card Stud; Razz (Seven-Card Stud Low); Seven-Card Stud High/Low; Lowball; Straw High; Draw Jacks-or-Better; or No Limit & Top Limit. The poker rules for each of these games are available, for example, at thepokerforum.com (www.thepokerforum.com/pokerrules.htm), hereby incorporated by reference. In any of these poker games, as well as any other card game, in accordance with the present invention, once play passes to a player, the time limit for that player to play a turn is limited by a predetermined time period in order to maintain the pace of the game, as well as a poker tournament. As such, the level of drama and therefore interest of the viewing audience, including live and television audiences, is maintained.

[0018] In order to further enhance the interest of the viewing audience in the card game, visual effects may optionally be provided which provide an indication of the amount of time for a player to play a hand before a subsequent action is taken, which could result in the player's hand being declared dead. In exemplary embodiments of the invention, different forms of visual effects may be provided to provide an indication to the players, as well as to the viewing audience, of the amount of time a player has to play a hand. In accordance with the present invention, individual, or combinations of, visual effects may be provided.

[0019] In one embodiment of the invention, a so-called "shot clock" may be provided. Exemplary shot clocks are illustrated in FIGS. 2A and 2B and are identified with the reference numerals 20 and 22, respectively. FIG. 2A represents a digital clock 20, while FIG. 2B illustrates an analog clock 22. Either of these clocks may be used to provide an indication of the time period a player has for playing a hand. As will be

discussed in more detail below, these shot clocks 20, 22 are reset by an operator every time play shifts to a new player. As play shifts, the clocks 20, 22 may be used to provide an indication of the remaining time available for a player to play a hand before or after subsequent action is taken. For example, after a first predetermined time period, a form of penalty or restriction may be imposed on the player. One form of penalty or restriction at the expiration of a first predetermined time period is that the player's hand is declared dead. Another form of penalty or restriction is that the player is forced to play the hand within a second time period before being declared dead. Other penalties are also contemplated.

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[0020] A sixty-second time period may be optionally selected as the first predetermined time period selected. In this case, a two-digit digital clock 20 may be used, as illustrated FIG. 2A. The digital clock 20 may be configured to count up to sixty or down from sixty. Alternatively, an analog clock 22 may be used as the shot clock. The analog clock 22 may be provided with a sweep hand 24, which may be configured to sweep either in a clockwise direction or in a counter-clockwise direction.

[0021] Various types of clocks may be used for the shot clocks 20 and 22. For example, the shot clocks may be physical hardware clocks or software clocks, well within the ordinary skill in the art. Both hardware and software clocks can be used to display the time period to the players, as well as to the viewing audience. In the case of the digital hardware shot clock 20, a pair of seven segment displays may be used. Alternatively, the digital shot clock 20 may be generated by way of a character generator by way of a personal computer and displayed and on a display, such as a liquid crystal display. U.S. Patent No. 5,293,354 discloses a remotely controlled digital

hardware shot clock, hereby incorporated by reference. U.S. Patent No. 5,821,914 discloses an apparatus for generating an analog software clock on an LCD. All such embodiments are considered to be within the broad scope of the present invention.

[0022] In accordance with another aspect of the invention, lighting effects may also be provided to provide indications of when the time period for a player taking action has lapsed, as well as of intermediate times before the expiration of the time period. An exemplary embodiment of such a system is illustrated in FIG. 1 and generally identified with the reference numeral 26. The control system 26 may include a personal computer 28, for example. The personal computer 28 may be coupled to a DMX controller 30.

[0023] The DMX controller 30 is a known device for controlling lighting devices, for example, the lighting devices 32, utilizing a protocol developed by the Engineering Commission of the United States Institute for Theater Technology, Inc. (USITT) in 1986. The DMX protocol is used for digital control of lighting devices 32. Such DMX controllers are extremely well known in the art and allow up to 512 different lighting devices to be controlled. The DMX controller 30 may be used to convert serial, parallel or USB data from the personal computer 28 into DMX 512 protocol.

[0024] As shown in FIG. 1, a serial, parallel or USB connector is connected to an available serial, parallel or USB port on the personal computer 28. The serial, parallel or USB data is coupled to the DMX controller 30 by way of a cable 34. The output of the DMX controller 30 may be coupled to external lighting devices 32 by way of a DMX 512 cable 36. As mentioned above, the DMX controller 30 has 512 channels, which allows up to 512 different lighting devices to be digitally controlled.

[0025] The DMX controller 30 may be a Whole-Hog PC controller, as manufactured by High End Systems, Austin, Texas. The DMX controller 30 may be a standalone unit, identified as a Wholehog II unit or a software module, identified as Wholehog PC unit, that can be uploaded into a personal computer having a Pentium II 400 MHz or higher processor, a Microsoft Windows 2000 operating system, and at least 8 Mbytes of hard disk space. The Wholehog software PC module is described in detail in the *Wholehog PC Handbook,* hereby incorporated by reference, available at www.flyingpig.com. Programming of the Wholehog II controller, whether on the standalone unit or on the Wholehog PC, is discussed in detail in Wholehog II Handbook Version 4.0, Whole Hog II Hog Unit Supplement, Version 3.1, available at www.highend.com, hereby incorporated by reference.

[0026] The lighting devices 32 may be as manufactured by Kinoflow, Inc., Sun Valley, California (www.kinoflow.com). The lighting devices 32 may simply be twenty-four banks of dimmable ballast fluorescent lights. For two-stage color effects, both white fluorescent lights and white fluorescent lights covered with a colored gel, for example, a red gel, available from High End Systems, may be utilized.

[0027] An operator reset 38 may be provided to enable an operator backstage to control playback of the light effects. The operator reset may simply be a mouse. A mouse may be used to interact with an optional graphical user interface, for example, the exemplary graphical user interface 40, illustrated in FIG. 3. The graphical user interface 40 may be configured with a plurality of exemplary buttons 42–52 for controlling the shot clock 20, 22, as well as a plurality of buttons 54–60 for controlling the lighting devices 32. A user-programmable dialog box 62 may also be provided to

enable the predetermined time to be programmed by the user. As shown, the dialog box 62 is shown with the number *60* representing sixty seconds. The buttons 42–52 are used to control the clock 20, 22. The **SET** button 42 may be used to set the time for the system. In particular, any time the designated time period in the dialog box 62 is changed, the **SET** button 42 is asserted to set the time. The **SET 60** button may be used to set the time period at sixty seconds. The **START** button 48 may be used to start the shot clock 20, 22. A **STOP** button 50 may be used to stop the shot clock 20 and 22. A **CLEAR** button 52 may be used to clear the timing period of the shot clock to enable a new time period to be set. The **RESTART 60** button 46 may be used to restart the shot clock 20 and 22 with a sixty-second time period.

[0028] As indicated above, the buttons 54–60 are for lighting control. The **KINOFLOW ON** button 54 may be used to turn on the white lights only. The **RED ON** button 56 may be used to turn on the red lights. The **ALL ON** button 58 may be used to turn on all of the lights, both red and white, while the **ALL OFF** button may be used to turn off all of the lights.

[0029] As mentioned above, the graphical user interface 40 is merely exemplary and may be used to facilitate operation of the system. Other controls may be used to initiate the lighting effects discussed above, such as hardware and combination hardware/software controls, all within the ordinary skill in the art. Also such embodiments are considered to be within the broad scope of the present invention.

[0030] FIG. 4 illustrates an exemplary method for programming the lighting devices 32. In particular, a sixty-second time period may be selected. This time period may be broken down into three periods t_1, t_2 and t_3. Time period t_1 may be, for example,

thirty seconds. The line 62 may be used to indicate a steady-on condition for the white lights. Thus, as shown, the white lights are on steady for a period of thirty seconds. After thirty seconds, the white lights may be programmed to pulse at a first rate, indicated by the pulses 64 and 66 for the time period t_2. The white lights may be programmed to pulse, for example, during time period t_2, up to fifty seconds, for example. After time period t_2, the lighting devices 32 may be programmed to pulse at a relatively faster pulse rate, as indicated by the pulses 68 and 70, until the end of the time period t_3, which, as shown, is sixty seconds. At the end of sixty seconds, the system may be programmed to turn the white lights and turn on the red lights for a predetermined time period and then reset to a steady-on position.

[0031] In operation, the system 26 (FIG. 1) may be reset by an operator reset, such as a mouse, when the game play transfers to a new player. In the exemplary embodiment illustrated in FIG. 3, the operator may, after setting the timing period, for example, to sixty seconds as shown, click on the **RESTART** 60 button 46 or the **START** button 48 after the system has been set for the predetermined time period. At the conclusion of the sixty-second time period, as discussed above, the system may be programmed to automatically turn off the white lights and turn on the red lights for a predetermined time period, such as five seconds. After the timing period for the red lights expires, the white lights may be turned back on and remain on until the operator initiates the timing period when play transfers to a new player.

[0032] Referring back to FIG. 1, the personal computer 28 may also be used to control the shot clock 22, 24. In one exemplary embodiment, the shot clock 20, 22 may be a software-generated soft shot clock which is displayed on an LCD. In this

embodiment, the personal computer 28 may be provided with a video card, for example, a Matrox Digi-Suite LE video card. The video card may be used to drive the LCD to provide a software-generated shot clock, as discussed above. The shot clock may also be a hardware shot clock, driven by the personal computer 28, and may consist of, for example, a hardware shot clock, as disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 5,293,354, hereby incorporated by reference.

[0033] Obviously, many modifications and variations of the present invention in light of the above teachings. Thus, it is to be understood that, within the scope of the appended claims, the invention may be practiced otherwise than as specifically described above.

[0034] What is claimed and desired to be secured by a Letters Patent of the United States is: